

# UNIVERSITIES, ACADEMICS AND THE GREAT SCHISM

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## MAPS

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All three maps are based on maps 119 and 123b in *Grosser Historischer Weltatlas*, Bayerischer Schulbuch-Verlag, 1970.

## INTRODUCTION

The schism which rent the Roman church in the years between 1378 and 1418 was a crisis of truly massive proportions. As a division within what claimed to be a universalist cosmology, it could obviously be settled only in similarly universalist terms. But, whilst dealing with many of the political and intellectual facets of the response to the crisis generated by the rival elections of Bartholomew Prignano and Cardinal Robert of Geneva to the papacy in 1378, and with the more personal involvement of the leading individuals of the period, the historiography of the great schism has not so far paid much attention to this universalist question throughout the entire period, particularly the involvement of those institutions specifically intended to be concerned with the issues raised by the dispute. Thus, although the administrative and institutional development of the medieval universities has been much dissected, little attention has been given to their activities when confronted with an ecclesiological issue of such dimensions as the schism. The purpose of this book is to attempt to redress the balance, by considering the participation of the European universities and their members in the debates which were generated as a result of the events of 1378.

Regardless of the stage of development by that date of an ecclesiology capable of offering an effective challenge to the papal monarchy, when the double election did occur and Europe reacted by dividing into rival camps there was no machinery in existence which could be immediately invoked to settle the problem. Some acceptable ecclesiological formula had therefore to be devised to permit the imposition of a solution, and that formula had to be produced by a body whose competence to act in such matters was universally recognised. Clearly, with the papacy itself divided, there was no chance of the rivals acting together, and, as the

cardinals were blamed for having caused the problem in the first place, it was most unlikely that they would be given the authority or the trust to end the dispute. In 1378, therefore, the most obvious alternative jurisdiction was that of the emperor: but with the death of Charles IV in 1378 and the accession of his son Wenceslas, that possibility was also destroyed. For a number of reasons the empire under Wenceslas proved incapable of acting in the dispute, an incapacity compounded in 1400 by the counter-election of Rupert III of the Palatinate as King of the Romans, thereby causing a schism in the empire as well as the papacy. The imperial authority to intervene in the search for an end to the papal schism was also limited and challenged by the rise of Gallikanism and the territorial monarchies, which claimed 'imperial' jurisdiction within their own frontiers. Only with the decay of this opposition and the reunification of the empire under Sigismund of Hungary after 1410 was the imperial jurisdiction recognised as capable of becoming effectively involved in the search for ecclesiastical reunification. But by that date the ecclesiology which would permit the imposition of a solution had already been devised. It is the contention of this book that the solutions had been produced within the universities, the academics having been accepted as the only remaining universal grouping capable of involving itself in the issues and arriving at the necessary ecclesiological remedy. Even though developments within the universities themselves, with growing diversification and fragmentation, progressive laicisation and a general transformation of the institutions, meant that the universality of the academic community was more imaginary than real; nevertheless the lingering notion of the international status of the universities as representatives of the supra-national community of learning meant that they could be conceded the authority to debate and pronounce on the means of attaining the reunification of the divided church. Not, admittedly, that they could do this with impunity, but nevertheless with a good deal of independence. The theories which were produced within the academic milieu during the period eventually resulted, after a number of false starts, in the ecclesiology of the Councils of Pisa and Constance and the restoration of a united papacy with the election of Martin V.

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The geographical and temporal scope of the subject have imposed their own necessary limitations of the amount of material I have been able to consider, and I make no claims for this to be more than a preliminary statement on academic involvement in the debates occasioned by the schism. Almost of necessity, the whole picture in the years to 1403 is dominated by events within the University of Paris, a situation for which there are three main reasons. The first is the pre-eminence attained (or, at least, sought) by the French in the attempt to resolve the schism by political methods, and even though his arguments have been modified during the course of the present century no historian of the schism can fail to be influenced by the ever-present shade of Noel Valois. For the University of Paris itself the sheer mass of available source material – whether published or still in manuscript form, and whether as official records or personal tracts and statements – virtually forces that corporation to the forefront of any consideration of academic involvement in the debates on the schism. Finally, however, the pre-eminence of the Parisian masters in the intellectual response to the schism prior to 1403 is also justified by the university's central position within the framework of the European discussions of the issue. This centrality was not only geographical, in that Paris was at the centre of the web of inter-university contacts which spread across the continent during this period, but it was also figurative, as it was the Parisian pronouncements on the various possible solutions to the division of the church which generally stimulated the formulation of declarations and statements on the issue by other bodies and institutions, both favouring and opposing the Parisian standpoint. A good deal of material doubtless remains to be discovered relating to academic reaction to the schism, but although this may diminish the quantitative preponderance of the Parisian masters in the debates, it seems unlikely that it will reduce their qualitative dominance. Indeed, it seems probable that it will tend to emphasise the central position of the University of Paris in the inter-academic debates.

This centrality became much less important after 1403, when Parisian dominance of the discussions declined. Correspondingly, the importance of other universities increased, although the

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removal of the unifying influence of Paris meant that the developments became more fragmentary. The complexities of the situation thereafter grew until, almost unexpectedly, the Council of Constance cut the Gordian knot and, with a blithe disregard for anything other than the reunification of the church, ended the schism almost (but not quite) as rapidly as the division had itself begun, after the death, forty years previously, of Pope Gregory XI.